

Nine Decades of Life on the Farm

Smith McCausland knows the 650 acres of his family farm like the back of his hand. He's spent his entire life working the land. At the age of 92, he has no regrets about his career choice.

"I couldn't have liked anything better than farming," the Mason County native said. "I loved growing up here. It was a great experience, one you'd never be able to get any place else."

Born in 1923, McCausland was raised in an old stone house on the banks of the Kanawha River. He knew from the very beginning he had some big footsteps to fill. He is the grandson of Gen. John McCausland.

The general, orphaned at an early age, came to live in Henderson, WV with his aunt and uncle. A graduate of the Virginia Military Institute, McCausland joined the Confederate Army at the start of the Civil War and fought several key battles, including the burning of Chambersburg. After the war, the general and his wife settled down to a life of farming on 3,000 acres straddling the Mason/Putnam County line. They called their home Grape Hill.

More than 150 years later, McCausland can look out his living room window, across Route 35 and watch cattle roam in the same field his grandfather farmed.

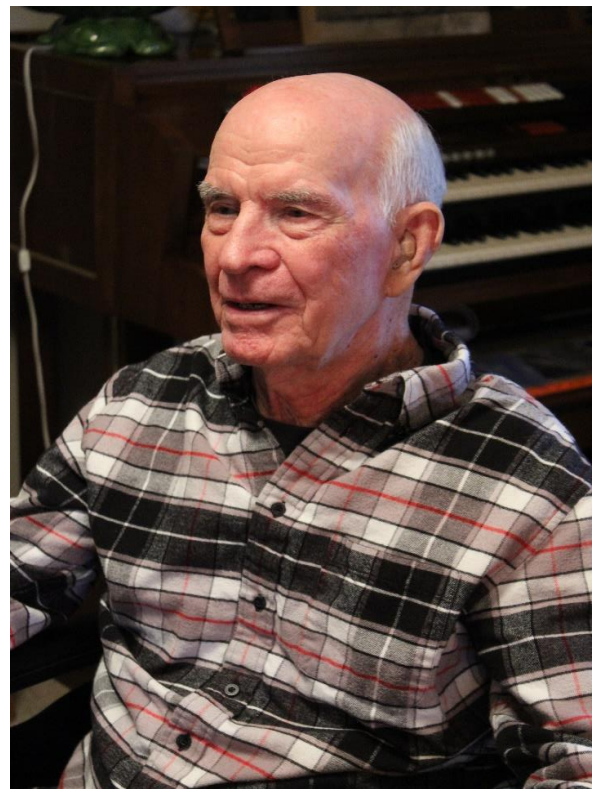
"The farm back then was nothing like it is now," explained McCausland. "They had a lot of forest they had to clear. They were able to put it into production only after they tilled it, to drain the water, in the late 1860's," explained McCausland.

Corn, wheat, and oats filled the fields while hundreds of head of cattle grazed the pastures. When the general died in 1927, he divided the farm between his children. McCausland's father retained about 1,000 acres and continued the family tradition. When Smith was born, he fell into farm life as well, tagging along with his father on all sorts of adventures.

"They used to drive the cattle from here in Pliny down to Henderson, 18 miles, in the spring. They would pasture them and then bring them back in the fall. Route 35 was not there. There was a little country road that went behind the house. All you had to do was start the cattle down the road and they'd pretty much go."

"I saw my dad sell cattle for five cents a pound. They were big, fat cattle that were finished out. Dad was glad to get that amount. There are a lot of expenses with farming. Sometimes it was a close profit."

McCausland and his father used mules to plant the crops in the spring.



"We didn't have any chemicals. We didn't have any fertilizers. Your fertilizer was the manure that came out of the barn!"

Come harvest time, the workload increased.

"We used a wheat binder. It would cut the wheat, fall on a canvas, and roll up. It was tied up in a bundle. You had a carrier that would hold about 10 bundles. Then they tripped it and it would drop it off. You had men that had to shuck it and let it stand in the field and cure until it was ready to be thrashed," said McCausland. "That was another job! The hay was just the same."

McCausland remembered as many as ten field hands working alongside him and his father during harvest.

In 1940, Smith left the farm to attend West Virginia University. However his stay was cut short. WWII broke out the next year and he was needed back at home.

"There were a lot of young men deferred to work on farms, to work the land and raise livestock. We had over 300 head of cattle," says McCausland.

He said hard work was a given. He got up at the break of dawn and worked well into the evening. There were successful harvests and lean years. Along the way he learned what it took to run a business.

"The most important thing my father taught me about farming was to make quick decisions. You have to make decisions on the job. You can't wait until tomorrow. And you don't worry about the decisions you've made. If you made a good one, fine. If it was a bad one, it happened yesterday. You move on."

Smith actively farmed his land until three years ago when an accident forced him to hand over the day to day operations. He hired a retired veteran to do the job. McCausland still plans and makes the big decisions about the farm. His employee carries out the job.

"I like farming because every day is different. You don't know when you go to work what you're going to do. You have an idea but you may have to switch and do what you have to do," said McCausland. "That's what makes it interesting, being able to adjust. If you don't adjust, you don't belong on a farm!"

McCausland isn't sure about the future of his farm. He hopes one of his grandchildren will take an interest and carry on the family tradition, just like he and his father before him.